studios. I had a cardboard box cut out with a bunch of wirewrap boards and I told them that if they gave me half the money up front, I'd finish the product in three months. And I told them the price would be $5,000. So I got a lot of deposits for $2,500, and that helped fund the company and sometime in early 1980 I shipped the first machines. The first machine went to Leon Russell, a songwriter. The second went to Stevie Wonder, who was very excited about it. Then lots of others . . . Anyway, I delivered the machines not in three months, but in eight months, and the first ones had some hardware problems because they were assembled at my house by unemployed musician friends. Altogether, I must have sold eighty-five units. But the LM-1 was the talk of the town, so we were beautifully positioned for the Linn Drum, which came out in 1982—a better machine at $3,000. It had cymbals and three dynamic levels for the snare drum instead of two and better buttons. Oberheim was showing a prototype of the DM-X at shows, and it had a very nice button that I didn't know existed. So I found a source for the button, put the button in my Linn Drum and then beat Oberheim to market and sold a total of about 5,000 units.

Tom Oberheim was adept at dealing with competition. In 1979, he responded to the Prophet-5's success by developing the *OB-X*, a completely programmable, microprocessor-controlled synthesizer which expanded to eight voices. In 1980, the OB-X was improved and became the OB-XA. In 1981, he designed the *DS-X* (digital sequencer) and the *DM-X* (drum machine) and made it possible to synchronize them in what became the Oberheim system. As he said, "It was very crude and expensive, but it worked." But expensive is a relative term. Oberheim's products, in general, were in the few-thousand-dollar range.

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The breakthrough technologies and growing market of the 1970s attracted many exceptional entrepreneurs, among them Felix Visser in Holland. Around 1970, Visser was working as a free-lance musician when he read an article about EMS (London) in *Tape Recorder* magazine. He remembers, "I wrote to EMS and they followed up with one of those floppy vinyl recordings—I still have it—and that completely blew my mind." Visser bought a Synthi A, in fact the first in Holland, but as he recalls, "After three days the damn machine broke down." Luckily, EMS had given him the circuit diagrams, and as he repaired it he thought, "Why did they do this instead of that?" And then his thoughts took a dangerous turn. As he put it, "I worked myself into a state of believing that I could do a better job."

Visser did the normal thing. He got a loan from a bank and started a company. He established Synton on January 1, 1973. And the plot soon thickened. As he tells it, "Three months, in those days, unhindered as I was by any knowledge or experience, seemed a hell of a lot of time—certainly enough time to design my synthesizer, called the *Syrinx*, a duophonic thing with state variable

filters, ADSRs, a ring modulator, noise, random voltage source, everything." So he hired two engineers. The three months flew past and, as he recalls, "of course, still no Syrinx, and then the bank wanted me to make payments." Pressed financially, he went into overdrive. He started to sell a phase shifter, a voltage-controlled filter, somewhat later a mixing console, and various other modules. As Visser said, "We were just beginning to start." He continues:

> We were happily selling our phaser to recording studios when The Golden Earring, a Dutch rock group, brought an Eventide phaser back from a USA tour. We were just trying to close a deal with one of the leading recording studios. All of a sudden they turned around and said, "Sorry, but this thing from the USA sounds a lot better." I spent three seconds sweating. Then I said, "Suppose that by tomorrow we deliver one which is better. Would you buy it or would you be too much of a snob and still go for the Eventide from the USA?" Since the guys didn't want to be snobs, or maybe out of compassion for me, they said that they would buy mine. They probably thought that I'd gone out of my mind. But I spent the whole evening and night building one. Basically, it was eight phase shifters of the type we had, cascaded, crammed into a one-unit nineteen-inch rack, with a front panel done on a 3M photographic aluminum sheet. It had a different model number and it stated the name of the studio. It looked great. They took it. I went to bed.

Visser produced many new devices and systems through the 1970s. A Synton modular series was developed. There were projects done for music conservatories and universities. And there was the Synton hybrid system, a studio driven by a PDP 11/03. But even though the activity increased, Synton remained small, four or five people. And as Visser remembers, they were having a very good time:

> We didn't make a whole lot of money, but it was sufficient and we were having a ball. It was so relaxed that visitors would think we were just having coffee or tea the whole day. It was true. We were enjoying every minute of it. We would just dream something up and then design and build it and we would always find someone to buy it.

The 1970s, however, soon became the 1980s. Visser got tough: "I announced to my Synton pals that we would no longer just do products for fun, but that we would market the hell out of them." The first highly visible product was a vocoder called the *Syntovox 221*, which was exhibited at AES conventions, NAMM shows, the Frankfurt Musik Messe, and, as he remembers, "about a zillion of little local things." He was one of the first European entrepreneurs to understand the importance of the NAMM show in Anaheim each January. In his words, "It marked the beginning of a period in which I started to build a strong worldwide network."

It also marked the beginning of a period when Synton became a distributor as well as a manufacturer. As Visser recalls, "In the early 1980s, the music industry took its first serious dip and we had to compensate for a slack in sales of our own products—so I started to scout for interesting other products." Synton took on products from E-mu, Fairlight, and Linn and expanded its sales territory into Belgium. During the same period, other important distributors and dealers were opening up in Europe, among them Syco in London and Syncrom in Rome. Synton, Syco, and Syncrom kept in such close touch that they were sometimes called "The S-Ociation."

Syco began with Peter Gabriel's interest in the Fairlight CMI. Stephen Paine had worked in stores in London for a year or so selling synthesizers, and then, as he tells it, "My cousin Peter invited me down to Ashcombe Studios in Bath to work on his third album, but when I say work, I mean look at Larry Fast working—I think that ham sandwiches might have been my minor contributions to that album." Coincidentally, Peter Vogel, one of the founders of Fairlight, was in England at the time to promote the Fairlight CMI II. He approached Gabriel as a potential customer. Paine continues:

> Peter was blown away with this thing. So a combination of factors—he wanted to use it, he felt that there would be a lot of interest from other artists, he wanted to be involved with bringing it to the UK, he could buy it less expensively, he felt that he could make some money if other people bought it, and he's always tried to justify his artistic whims with some commercial motivation—led him to persuade me to start a company to sell it.

Gabriel named the company Syco. Operations began in a farmhouse in Bath. Paine made a few sales. And then, after a year or so, Gabriel and Paine decided to move Syco to London. Their concept was to do something very special. As Paine said, "We were determined that it would be entirely different from the sort of normal outfit that sells synthesizers."

In 1982, Syco, located toward the end of an alleyway next to Paddington Station, opened its doors in London. Opening a single large wooden door, in fact, one entered a large foyer, bare except for beautiful paintings, Charles Rennie Mackintosh furniture, and a wooden table off to one side behind which sat a receptionist. There were demonstration areas upstairs ("by appointment only, of course"), and there was a large cafe downstairs, with resident cook and waiter, for staff and customers. In an adjacent building, there was a garage to which selected customers were given automatic door openers so they could privately park their cars. Paine's logic is not untypical of the creative entrepreneur when he reflects, "We didn't always make corporately sensible decisions, but had we been accountants we wouldn't have done it at all." He continues:

> You could buy innovative cutting edge technology in a private, comfortable environment. It was the sort of environment that we wanted to work

in, so the natural assumption was that if we wanted to work there customers would want to come there. And they did. It was immensely successful. It was like nothing before it and probably like nothing ever will be again.

Syco's peak was in 1985 and 1986, with a staff of about thirty people and an expanded product line that included the Emulator, Synclavier, Linn Drum, and PPG Wave synthesizers. The floors were separated, as Paine described it, "into the expensive stuff on the top and the less expensive stuff down below." Syco also sold Fazioli pianos, in Paine's words, "the only handmade pianos in the world, with a purity and depth of sound that no other pianos had—it lent a unique combination of flavors, presentation and ambience, and after all, we were in the business of supplying technology that made beautiful sounds."

Not only supplying technology, Paine also developed technology. Carl Scofield, who had joined Syco in 1984, designed and built several interesting devices, among them the *Sycologic* analog-to-MIDI converter, the *PSP* (Percussion Synthesizer Programmer), and a MIDI patch bay called the *M-16*. Scofield and Paine also developed a digital recording and editing system called *The Tablet*. Paine describes it:

> It was based on transputer technology, which was quite revolutionary in those days. But the interface was the most important element. We wanted to create an interface which would present the user with a set of familiar tools—after all, we were trying to replace tape recorders—but our goal was also to design a reconfigurable interface that would let us change functionality without making things more complex for the user. Like Syco itself, we seemed to have cracked the way to present a radical technology to people who felt they couldn't cope with screens and keyboards. And again, as we designed Syco as a place that we wanted to work in, so we designed The Tablet as a device that we wanted to use. I can't tell you the excitement it caused. We had the BBC Research Department working with us. And there was no lack of orders. We had an order for a quarter-million pounds from the BBC. But the research and development timescale stretched and stretched and stretched, and we weren't able to bring a product to market before the money ran out.

Syncrom began in 1983. At Crumar for several years, Rene Rochat had marketed the General Development System and Synergy, among other products, and then, bit by the entrepreneurial bug in 1981, he had started MIM (Musical Instrument Manufacturers) as a company to distribute the GDS, Synergy, and all E-mu products for Europe. MIM ended in 1982. But the fun began when Rochat started Syncrom, which he referred to as "the first high-tech professional outlet in Italy." Syncrom's opening, with Visser and Paine attending, was in September 1983 in Rome. As Rochat tells it, "We were showing professional performers a completely different way of making music—it